

4.4.2008 - Rahall Report: Traveling West Virginia by Trail

West

Virginia has been blessed by an abundance of natural resources and a striking environment that draw tourists from around the globe and place it in a league all its own.

With

spring right around the corner, I want to encourage West Virginians to travel West Virginia's trails, highways, and byways and experience the unique and picturesque glimpse into our Nation's history and natural beauty, which they provide.

The

West Virginia Department of Highways is touting twenty-three scenic byways, offering tourists and locals a more leisurely alternative to frantic Interstate traffic and a chance to immerse themselves in the rich cultural and historic heritage specific to our region.

Take

the Midland Trail Scenic Byway, an 81-mile drive on US 60 over the northern two-thirds of the Midland Trail Scenic Highway from Sam Black Church to Malden. It is the perfect trail to satisfy both leaf-peepers and history buffs. The Trail itself was once a warpath for Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. As you travel the Trail, be sure to watch for what is arguably the grandest historical site in all of West Virginia, the award-winning Greenbrier Resort.

Or,

if you prefer, travel through a wild and undeveloped portion of the state on the 45-mile drive along the Highland Scenic Byway through the Monongahela National Forest. Stop at any of the four scenic overlooks along the Byway and you will be welcomed by a breathtaking view of the Allegheny Highlands. Here you can see West Virginia's famed mountainous terrain, covered by hardwood forests, dark spruce, majestic waterfalls, and even the occasional water bog!

A

less-known treasure lies in the southeastern corner of West Virginia, where Monroe County's Farm Heritage Road offers a picture of life in rural agricultural communities which in many ways, retains the character of previous generations. The 60-mile Road has hardly changed over the last hundred years and encompasses three distinct geographical settings: the gentle winding of Indian Creek, the rolling plateaus of farmland, and the picturesque Sweet Springs Valley nestled alongside Peters Mountain in the Appalachian Ridge and Valley region. Centuries of industry and commercialism have largely by-passed the area, preserving many old houses and farms from throughout the county's 200 year history in their original state.

There

is the famous Coal Heritage Trail, a 97-mile rolling and winding route from Bluefield to Beckley that traverses the heart of coal country.

Visitors will travel a timeline of the American coal industry, viewing old mining camps and the luxurious mansions of coal mine owners of old, as well as active coal mining operations along the way.

An absolute must-see along the Trail is the world-renown and recently renovated Beckley

Exhibition Coal Mine, where visitors can actually see how the fuel that powers most of the East Coast is produced.

No travel adventure in West Virginia could be complete without a passing reference to the famous Hatfield and McCoy feud. The Hatfield-McCoy Trail, a 55-mile drive along the Tug Fork River to Matewan, showcases the scene of the legendary Hatfield-McCoy family feuds of the 19th century. The Hatfield-McCoy Trail presents the local lore that made these two great families, and West Virginia, famous to Americans set amidst the unparalleled beauty of the rolling hills of southern West Virginia.

Saving the best for last, is the New River Gorge and the bridge that spans it. It twists, curves, and drops 1,000 feet from the edge to the river creating one of the most breathtaking views in the world. The 16-mile drive will take you into the gorge, across the river, up the far side of the gorge, across the modern New River Gorge Bridge, some 876 feet above the River, and finally to the Canyon Rim Visitor Center. The New River itself is also home to some of the most challenging and exciting rapids in the Nation.

As our State Motto—*Montani semper liberi*—"Mountaineers are always free" suggests, West Virginians never miss an opportunity to pay homage to our beautifully rugged landscape or our rich culture. And traveling West Virginia's trails in the springtime is the perfect opportunity to experience the natural beauty of our State.